

**EXCERPTS FROM CHŎNG INJI'S POSTSCRIPT TO THE HUNMIN
CHŎNGŬM (CORRECT SOUNDS TO INSTRUCT THE PEOPLE), 1446**

Introduction

The Chinese and Korean languages are very different. Korean, for example, has many suffixes that attach to verb stems to indicate tense, mood, attitude, formality, and the relative status of speaker and listener, while Chinese does not inflect verbs in this way. Nonetheless, until the 15th century, Korean authors had had no choice but to use Chinese ideographs to transcribe Korean speech, sometimes employing hybrid writing forms, such as *hyangch'al* and *idu* (discussed in the reading), in which such ideographs could be used alternately to express meaning and sound. Such systems were awkward and difficult to use. Therefore, over a period of years culminating in 1443, King Sejong (1418-1450) of Chosŏn, widely considered the best king in Korean history, led a group of scholars in the development of a twenty-eight-symbol alphabet and then proclaimed the new system in 1446 in a work entitled *Hunmin chŏngŭm* (Correct Sounds to Instruct the People). Sejong himself wrote a brief preface to the *Hunmin chŏngŭm*, while a scholar named Chŏng Inji who had worked on the project wrote a postscript, given here.

Now known as *han'gŭl*, with slight modification this alphabet is still used today. It is widely considered easy to learn, and is beloved by many linguists for its scientific qualities — the shape of its consonants, for example, represent the way in which the tongue and lips are formed to produce different consonant sounds in the mouth. Its vowel system, meanwhile, reflects Confucian metaphysics of the time of its origin: vowels are composed of three sub-units reflecting concepts of heaven, earth, and humans.

Document Excerpts with Questions (Longer selection follows this section)

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(Correct Sounds to Instruct the People), 1446

Yet climates and soils in the four corners of the world are different, and enunciations and material force are likewise diverse. In general, the languages of different countries have their own enunciations but lack their own letters, so they borrowed the Chinese graphs to communicate their needs. This is, however, like trying to fit a square handle into a round hole.

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In the winter of the year *kyehae* [1443], His Majesty, the king, created twenty-eight letters of the Correct Sounds and provided examples in outline demonstrating their meanings. His Majesty then named these letters *Hunmin chŏngŭm*.

[Translated by Yŏngho Ch'oe]

Questions:

1. What effects do you imagine the new alphabet might have had?

Longer Selection

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***Excerpts from Chŏng Inji's Postscript to the Hunmin chŏngŭm
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Just as there are enunciations that are natural to heaven and earth, there must also be writing that is natural to heaven and earth. It is for this reason that the ancients devised letters corresponding to enunciations so as to convey the situations and sentiments of myriad things and to record the ways of heaven, earth, and men so that they cannot be changed by later generations.

Yet climates and soils in the four corners of the world are different, and enunciations and material force are likewise diverse. In general, the languages of different countries have their own enunciations but lack their own letters, so they borrowed the Chinese graphs to communicate their needs. This is, however, like trying to fit a square handle into a round hole. How could it possibly achieve its objective satisfactorily? How could there not be difficulties? It is, therefore, important that each region should follow the practices that are convenient to its people and that no one should be compelled to follow one writing system alone.

Although our country's rituals, music, and literature are comparable to those of China, our speech and language are not the same as China's. Those who studied books in Chinese were concerned about the difficulty of understanding their meaning and purport; those who administered the penal system were troubled by the difficulty in communicating the complexity of its legal texts. In the old days, Sŏl Ch'ong [c. 660-730] of Silla first devised the writing system known as *idu*, which has been used by our government and people to this day. But all the graphs were borrowed from Chinese, and frequently there arise problems and difficulties. Not only is *idu* vulgar and baseless, but as a means of linguistic communication, it cannot transmit one meaning in ten thousand cases.

In the winter of the year *kyehae* [1443], His Majesty, the king, created twenty-eight letters of the Correct Sounds and provided examples in outline demonstrating their meanings. His Majesty then named these letters *Hunmin chŏngŭm*. Resembling pictographs, these letters imitate the shapes of the old seal characters. Based on enunciation, their sounds correspond to the Seven Modes in music. These letters embrace the principles of heaven, earth, and men as

well as the mysteries of yin and yang, and there is nothing they cannot express. With these twenty-eight letters, infinite turns and changes may be explained; they are simple and yet contain all the essence; they are refined and yet easily communicable. Therefore, a clever man can learn them in one morning, though a dull man may take ten days to study them. If we use these letters to explain books, it will be easier to comprehend their meanings. If we use these letters in administering rhymes, one can easily distinguish voiced and voiceless consonants; as for music and songs, twelve semitones can be easily blended. They can be used whatever and wherever the occasion may be. Even the sounds of wind, the cries of cranes, the crowing of roosters, and the barking of dogs can all be transcribed in writing.

Consequently, we were commanded to provide more detailed explanations for all the people to understand. This servant, therefore, along with his other ministers — Ch'oe Hang, Fourth Grade official; Pak P'aengnyŏn, Junior Fifth Grade official; Sin Sukchu, Junior Fifth Grade official; Sŏng Sammun, Sixth Grade official, all in the hall of Worthies; Kang Hŭian, Sixth Grade official in the Royal House Administration; Yi Kae, acting Junior Fourth Grade official; and Yi Sŏllo, acting Junior Fourth Grade official in the Hall of Worthies — have prepared all the explanations and various examples to illustrate the general outline of the new writing system so that any reader can learn it without a teacher. The subtlety of its profound sources and deep meanings, however, is beyond the scope of our ability to demonstrate fully.

As we humbly reflect, our king, being a heaven-endowed sage, has instituted various systems and institutions that excel those established by a hundred other kings. As for the making of the Correct Sounds, it is not something that has been transmitted from our ancestors but has been achieved by nature. There is nothing in the Correct Sounds that is not based on the ultimate principle; there is no bias such as one finds in the things made by men. Although our country has existed in the eastern corner of the world for a long period of time, not until today has the great wisdom of cultivating a new enlightenment and completing its task been realized.

[Translated by Yŏngho Ch'oe]

Questions:

1. What effects do you imagine the new alphabet might have had?
2. Why does Chŏng advocate the new alphabet over Chinese or *idu*?
3. How does he justify it philosophically? Does he simply present it as a practical innovation?
4. What do you think was his overall view of Chosŏn's relationship to China?